

A REBUTTAL

I found the article by J. T. Leverich on "What is a Bird Species" to be most interesting. It is knowledgeable without being pedantic, and it presents in a very clear manner many of the highlights of the 32nd Supplement. For these reasons I was somewhat surprised to note Leif Robinson's reaction.

Mr. Robinson says, "As for me, I'll count any species, race, or morph that can be reliably identified through field marks, voice, or habitat." Okay, let's see where this leads. First, Leif specifically mentions "the two largest herons in North America"; he counts both of them. Obviously, he therefore must also count another conspicuous pair of Ardeids - the White Reddish Egret and the Reddish Reddish Egret. Why not?--they are both "reliably identified through field marks," etc. Also, the Gray Screech Owl and the Rufous Screech Owl are easy. The list is looking good so far. Add Purple Grackle, Bronzed Grackle, and, of course, Ridgway's Grackle--all easily identified in the field if a bit of care is exercised. Now, let's see...how many of the Sharp-tailed Sparrows are we to count? There are some people who can reliably identify at least three races in the field (I am decidedly not one of those people). After all, L.J.R. presumably wants to keep the three Seaside Sparrows, and they are in no way superior to my nominees, the three Sharp-tails.

From here on it can get ridiculous. The female Williamson's Sapsucker is very different from her mate; under Leif's criteria she probably qualifies. Well, if not her, at least we can include the Pied Blue Heron. And a common bird hereabouts in the spring is the Yellow-billed Starling. To amplify the possibilities, just remember that Mr. L. Irby Davis "reliably identifies" a great many forms through voice; his list is amazing--and highly "personal," to mention another of Leif's touchstones. Davis's list is very likely to remain highly personal, I might add. Yet his strange list makes good sense if we accept the premise of counting "what we are able to recognize in the field." After all, a tape recorder is not one whit more artificial than is a pair of binoculars.

To make any kind of consistent sense, Leif must accept any of the "species" which have appeared on earlier A.O.U. Check-lists--not only those on the 1957 effort. Many of these are, of course, no longer any more valid than some of the 1957 entries will be after the new list comes out. Even a desultory examination of Dr. Roger Tory Peterson's super job on A Field Guide to Mexican Birds indicates what we have ahead of us: many more name changes will be made. They have to be; many of the current names are stupid, illogical, duplicative, misleading, and confused. Also, in many cases they were based on entirely inadequate information. G. Stuart Keith covers the issues extremely well in his article in Birding, Vol. IV, No. 2. But people are fighting the facts. It is a rear-guard action only; logic, common sense, and the march of history are all on the side of the professionals.

In 1970 the California Field Ornithologists published a workable compromise; their list of the Birds of California is compiled according to species--insofar as present knowledge permits an accurate listing--but with named variations within that category being listed in a sub-category. Thus, anyone who wants to count these recognizable forms may continue to do so. But do not call them "species"; to do so would be grossly inaccurate.

In my own records, I have always had a small group called Recognizable Sub-species and Named Hybrids. That list will now expand as it absorbs entries from the main Life List. I can live with (Kumlien's) Iceland Gull and (Ipswich) Savannah Sparrow--to use the best technique of vernacular naming which I have seen, that of Dr. Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., in his famous Guides to Bird Finding; American Birds has not yet realized that this method is the answer to their nomenclatural dilemma.

All of us are going to have to adapt to some variation of the system noted above, because a great many more changes are very obviously in the works. The new Check-list will not be hard to live with--after we get used to it through seeing it in print in completed form (which will not, of course, be a permanent list...). The process will not be painful, for everyone will suffer approximately the same losses. I lose about 16 pseudo-species but pick up 8 others; so what? The situation is inevitable in a growing, evolving scientific discipline. Birding will be less interesting when all of our knowledge is static. But don't worry: that will never happen!

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